

**FREE**

# A Parent's Guide to Primary School

**What Every Parent Should Understand  
Before Their Child Starts Reception**



An insider explanation from a teacher, school leader and dad to help families navigate the move to primary school with confidence.

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# Navigating the school system

In October, 2021, my life changed - permanently and for the better. I was no longer just a teacher or school leader. I was now a dad.



Since becoming a parent I realised three things about the education system:

1. Information is sparse for parents like you, who want to know more about the system their child is entering into
2. The information that *is* available is often confusing, conflicting and disjointed
3. There is no source of clear, objective information. Just schools, councils and government all pushing their own agenda.

I decided to set up School Compass to help you navigate your child's school journey with more knowledge, confidence and excitement!

School Compass helps parents understand how schools work, navigate the system with confidence and support their children without becoming overwhelmed.

I look forward to helping you navigate one of the most important journeys in your child's life.

Joe Pardoe

# Introduction

Starting primary school is an exciting milestone, but it can also feel daunting.

You care deeply about your child's education. You may have spent months thinking about school choices, practical arrangements and whether your child will be ready.

Primary school operates differently from nursery or pre-school. The systems are bigger, communication works in new ways and children are expected to become gradually more independent.

Many parents tell me the same thing:

'I wish I had understood how primary schools actually work before my child started.'

I have spent more than 17 years working in education. This guide explains the most important differences and gives you practical ways to use the summer so you can approach September with greater confidence.



In this short guide I want to take you on a journey. It has three stages...

## **UNDERSTAND**

*How primary schools work*

## **NAVIGATE**

*What actually matters during the first few weeks*

## **THRIVE**

*How to support your child at home*

# The Journey from Point A to Point B

For many parents, the summer before primary school begins at Point A.

Point A often feels like this:

- worried about how your child will cope
- unsure how primary schools actually work
- wondering how teachers will get to know your child
- uncertain about how much preparation is helpful

Over the summer, you want to move towards Point B.

Point B looks different:

- you understand how the school system works
- you know how to communicate with the school
- your child feels prepared without being overwhelmed
- you feel calmer and better informed
- you know how to support your child effectively

This guide will help you start that journey.

## **WANT SUPPORT THROUGH THE WHOLE TRANSITION?**

The £69 Summer Transition Programme includes the complete course, practical summer guidance, expert masterclasses and support through your child's first month of Reception.

[www.school-compass.com/primary-summer-transition](http://www.school-compass.com/primary-summer-transition)

# How Primary Schools Actually Work

One of the biggest differences between nursery / pre-school and primary school is scale.

Starting primary school isn't just a new setting.

It's a shift in how your child is cared for, supervised and communicated about.

And some of these changes can feel surprising if you're coming from nursery.

## 1. Staff ratios are very different

In nursery settings, staff ratios are much higher. There are more adults per child, which means:

- more individual attention
- more flexibility
- more frequent updates

In school, ratios are lower. A typical Reception class will have:

- one teacher
- and a teaching assistant

Supporting a much larger group of children - up to 30. In towns and cities, this is likely to be the class size.

This doesn't mean your child is getting less care.

It means the environment is designed differently - with a focus on independence and group routines.

## 2. Your child will be supported by multiple adults

Your child's class teacher is important. They will be the main point of contact and they will be responsible for the class. In Reception, this teacher has to be a fully qualified teacher (which is a difference compared to nursery settings).

But they are not the only adult your child will interact with.

Across the day, your child may be supported by:

- teaching assistants
- lunchtime supervisors
- wrap-around care staff

Lunch and break times, in particular, are often supervised by different adults.

This is normal in schools - but it can feel unfamiliar if you're used to one consistent key person who has information about the whole of child's day.

What this means is your child's class teacher will not usually be able to give you detailed information about what your child has eaten at lunch, who they played with at break time or how they are finding the wrap-around care provision. It is simply because this teacher will be having their break / lunch / meetings etc during these times.

The class teacher will likely be able to find out the information you need - but it won't be instant!

### 3. Communication will feel different

In nursery, you may be used to:

- daily updates
- informal conversations at pick-up
- regular insights into your child's day

In our child's nursery, we had daily updates via an app! I know some settings even allow parents to access live video to 'check-in' if they are worried.

In school, this changes.

Teachers are responsible for a full class and have limited time outside of lessons.

So communication tends to be:

- less frequent
- more structured
- and often focused on key issues rather than daily summaries

No news is often good news.

You will usually get that daily contact during drop-off and pick-up. However, a key thing to remember is that one of the jobs of the class teacher at these points is to ensure all children are safe - whether entering the classroom or being collected by the trusted adult. It is completely fine to bring up small things during these times, but if you want to talk about something detailed with full-concentration, it is probably best to arrange a call or face-to-face meeting outside of school hours.

## 4. Wrap-around care may be separate

If your child attends breakfast club or after-school provision, it's important to know that these are often run by:

- different staff
- sometimes (usually!) external providers which the school has 'bought-in'

So even though your child is in the same building from 8am–5pm...

They are not being supervised by the same adult - or even the same team - all day.

This is completely normal, but worth understanding so your expectations are realistic. For example, if you pass a message to the class teacher, don't assume this will be communicated to the wrap-around care team.

The key shift:

School is a shared system, not a single adult looking after your child.

What this means for you...

You may feel like you have:

- less visibility
- fewer updates
- less direct contact

And that can feel uncomfortable at first. But it doesn't mean your child isn't safe, supported or known. The system feels different - but it is designed to help your child grow in independence, confidence and resilience.

# What YOU Can Do Now

Use the summer to practise independence in ordinary family life.

There is no need to recreate Reception at home.

## **1. Encourage small acts of independence**

Give your child opportunities to:

- put on their own coat and shoes
- carry their own bag
- tidy away toys
- open their lunchbox and water bottle
- use the toilet independently

## **2. Practise short separations**

If your child is used to being with you most of the time, build in safe opportunities to spend time with trusted adults or attend a club or play session.

The aim is not to eliminate every wobble. It is to help your child learn that they can separate from you, feel safe and reconnect afterwards.

### **3. Build simple routines**

Schools run on routines. You can make this transition easier by introducing:

- consistent bedtimes
- predictable morning rhythms
- regular mealtimes

Children feel more secure when they know what to expect.

### **4. Talk positively about school**

Your child will take cues from you. Try to frame school as:

- a place to explore
- a place to make friends
- a place where they will be looked after

Even if you feel unsure... your calm confidence helps them feel safe.

### **5. Focus on confidence, not perfection**

You don't need to 'prepare' your child academically.

You don't need them reading, writing or counting. What matters most is that they feel:

- confident
- capable
- and ready to try

Independence isn't something children suddenly have. It's something they build - step by step.

# How Communication Works in Primary School

So how do you stay informed in a system like this? Once you understand how primary school works... The next question is: How do I actually stay connected to what's going on?

Because it can feel like a big shift from:

- daily updates
- familiar staff
- constant visibility

...to something that feels more distant.

## 1. Understand how communication works

In primary school, communication is usually:

- less frequent
- more structured
- and often one-way (newsletters, apps, emails)

Teachers are responsible for a full class and have limited time outside of lessons. So instead of daily updates...

You'll tend to hear when:

- something is important
- something has changed
- or something needs your attention

No news is usually good news. But the class teacher will know a good deal about your child after the first few weeks.

## 2. Know when (and how) to reach out

One of the biggest shifts for parents is you are no longer given constant updates - you may need to ask.

If you have a question or concern, the best first step is usually:

- ✓ A short, polite message
- ✓ Or a quick conversation at pick-up / drop-off (if appropriate)

And most importantly: Focus on understanding, not escalating

For example:

Instead of:

‘I’m worried this isn’t being handled properly’

Try:

‘I just wanted to check how things are going from your perspective’

This keeps the relationship positive and open.

EVERYTHING is easier if the relationship is positive. It is also usually much easier to solve problems with a phone call or face-to-face chat if there is already a relationship there - so focus on building a positive rapport.

A quick note: AI generated emails can hide a lot of the ‘human tone’ and once a formal complaint is started - there is a process which must be followed. Obviously, these are in place for a reason, so use them if needed, but in my experience almost all issues can be solved positively and quickly with a friendly, future focused (no one can change the past) chat.

### 3. Get comfortable with less detail

This is often the hardest part. You may not know:

- exactly what your child did each day
- who they played with every time
- how they performed in every activity

And that can feel like a loss of control.

Also, children tend to report things from their perspective (and usually the things which happened towards the end of the day). If your child says something negative, don't assume that is what their entire day is like - a quick check-in with the class teacher to get their perspective usually helps!

Over time, your child starts to hold their own experience

They begin to:

- tell you what mattered to them
- interpret their own day
- build independence

One of the purposes of school is to grow that independence - that, inevitably, means letting go of control!

## 4. Focus on patterns, not moments

Every child (every human!) will have:

- wobbly days
- tired afternoons
- friendship ups and downs

These are normal. What matters more is the pattern over time

- Are they settling overall?
- Are they beginning to feel comfortable?
- Are small issues resolving?

## 5. Build a simple rhythm at home

You don't need perfect insight into the school day. But you can create a rhythm that keeps you connected.

Try:

- a calm moment after school (not an interrogation)
- simple, open questions
- consistent routines

For example: 'What was your favourite part of today?'

This keeps communication:

- low pressure
- consistent
- meaningful

**The key shift: You move from constant visibility → to trust + selective communication**

## HOW PROGRESS IS SHARED IN RECEPTION

In nursery, you may be used to regular updates, informal feedback and frequent observations. In Reception, assessment becomes more structured.

Teachers build a picture of your child over time through everyday observation. They consider areas including:

- communication and language
- physical development
- personal, social and emotional development
- literacy and maths

You will not receive constant updates about every activity. Instead, schools usually share occasional updates, reports or conversations at particular points in the year.

This can feel unsettling, but less information does not mean less attention. Behind the scenes, teachers are observing your child, noticing patterns and making professional judgements.

You do not need to track every small step or recreate the curriculum at home. Your role is to support confidence, routines and engagement.

Early assessments are not a fixed judgement about your child's future. They help teachers understand where support may be useful now.

## **WANT MORE SUPPORT THROUGH THE WHOLE TRANSITION?**

The Primary Summer Transition Programme helps you prepare calmly over the summer and gives you somewhere trustworthy to bring your questions when Reception begins.

### **YOU RECEIVE:**

- the complete Primary Transition Course
- practical summer preparation guidance
- an expert Masterclass Library
- guides, frameworks and resources
- question submission and independent support
- support until 30 September

### **£69 ONE-OFF PAYMENT**

**Enrolment closes on 31 August.**

**[www.school-compass.com/primary-summer-transition](http://www.school-compass.com/primary-summer-transition)**

# Supporting Your Child Through the Transition

Once your child starts school, it's natural to want to help.

- To check.
- To guide.
- To make sure they're doing okay.

But this is where a small shift makes a big difference.

Your role is not to create the perfect school. Your role is to help your child feel confident within it.

## 1. Prioritise routines over results

What matters most in the early weeks isn't academic progress.

It's consistency. Simple things make a big difference:

- ✓ A calm, predictable morning routine
- ✓ Enough sleep
- ✓ A steady rhythm to the week

These create a sense of security.

And when children feel secure...

They are far more ready to learn.

This can be something you start to embed now, so the aspects 'around' school don't change between now and September.

## **2. Keep goodbyes calm and confident**

Drop-off can be emotional. Sometimes more for the parent than the child!

But children take their cues from you. A calm, confident goodbye tells your child: This is safe. You've got this.

Even if there are wobbles at the gate...

Children often settle quickly once inside.

Most teachers will tell you that minutes (even seconds!) after you leave, your child is happily playing. It can be difficult to believe, but it is in no one's interest to have a sad child all day - if it is a problem, the school will likely chat to you about it. If not, trust that once you have left, your child is getting on with a million stimulating things!

## **3. Talk about the day (without pressure)**

It's tempting to ask lots of questions:

What did you do?

Who did you play with?

Did you do your phonics?

But this can feel overwhelming. Especially straight after school!

Instead, keep it simple, open and whilst 'doing' something else...  
'What was your favourite part of today?'

This builds connection, reflection and positive associations with school. And over time, your child will likely share more. Until the teenage years!

## **DON'T RUSH TO FIX EVERY PROBLEM**

Your child may tell you about friendship issues, small worries or things that did not go well. This is part of learning. Not every problem needs solving immediately.

Sometimes children need space to:

- process what happened
- try again
- ask for help
- build resilience

If something persists or escalates, speak to the school. But many small issues resolve naturally.

## **PROTECT YOUR CHILD'S CONFIDENCE**

It is easy to compare. You may wonder whether other children are reading more confidently or settling more quickly. Early differences are common and often temporary. Confidence matters more than early performance.

## **TRUST THE PROCESS**

Starting school is a transition for you as well as your child. There will be moments when you wish you had more information or greater control. Over time, you will find your rhythm with the school and with your role in supporting your child.

The aim is not to protect your child from every difficulty. It is to help them grow through it.

# Moving Forward with Confidence

This guide has introduced some of the most important differences between nursery and primary school.

But understanding the system is only the beginning.

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